THE STŪPA ARCHITECTURE OF VAIŚĀLĪ.

BY

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The history of the *stūpa* architecture of Vaiśālī[1] (District Muzaffarpur, Bihar) begins with the very infancy of the Buddhist *stūpa* architecture as a whole. After the *mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, his corporeal relics were distributed among the eight claimants each of whom built a *stūpa* over his share. Lichchhavis of Vaiśālī being one of the claimants[2] got their share of relics and erected a *stūpa* over them in their land. This relic *stūpa* was discovered[3] in 1958 (Pl. I); the original *stūpa* was of mud and the later three enlargements were of bricks. This *stūpa* alone has preserved the history of the regional *stūpa* architecture of at least 600 years, although we have discovered three other pre-Christian mud stūpas in the vicinity of Vaiśālī, viz., two earthen mounds near Aśokan pillar locally known as *Bhīmasena Kā Pallā* (Pls. II, III), one earthen mound on the north-western corner of Virpur *chour* (low-lying area)—locally known as Marpasaunā (Pl. IV), and there are remains of a few brick *stūpas*, viz., one below *Shāh Kājin Kā Dargāh*, one near Aśokan pillar etc. The two earthen mounds near Aśokan pillar, as a result of excavations, were proved to be relic stūpas[4] and the Marpasaunā earthen mound a commemorative one[5], the big size of these mud *stūpas*[6]

1 Vaiśālī is an important archaeological site in the District of Muzaffarpur, North Bihar. As a result of archaeological excavations and explorations on the site, a number of ancient remains including those of Buddhist stūpas has been discovered.

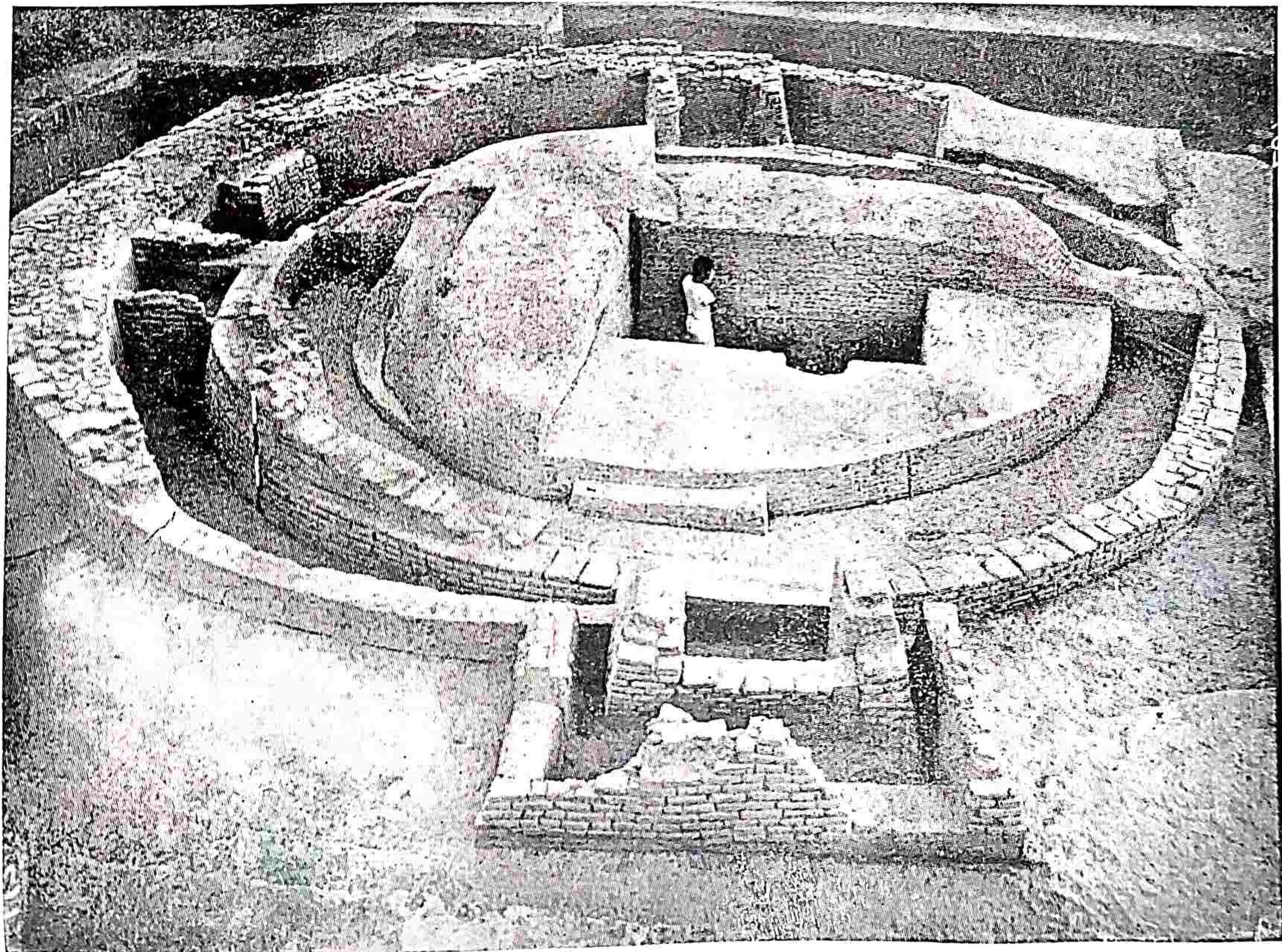
2 The other seven claimants were Ajātaśatru of Magadh, the Mallas of Kuśīnagara where the Buddha attained his *mahāparinirvāṇa*, Mallas of Pārā, the Moriyas of Pippalīvana, the Śākyas of Kapilavastu, the Bulis of Alkappa and the Kolis of Rāmagrāma.

3 *Indian Archaeology—A Review*, 1957-58, pp. 10-11; *J. B. R. S.* (Buddha Jayanti Special Issue), vol. II, pp. 501-11.

4 *Indian Archaeology—A Review*, 1961-62, p. 7

5 Author's unpublished report on *Vaiśalī Excavations 1958-62*.

6 The mounds of *Bhimasena Kā Pallā* were 25′ and 23′ high having respectively 183′ and 179′ basal diameters. The Marpasaunā mound was about 10′ have having a flat base, but covering a big area. It was possibly high in the beginning.



Pla. I

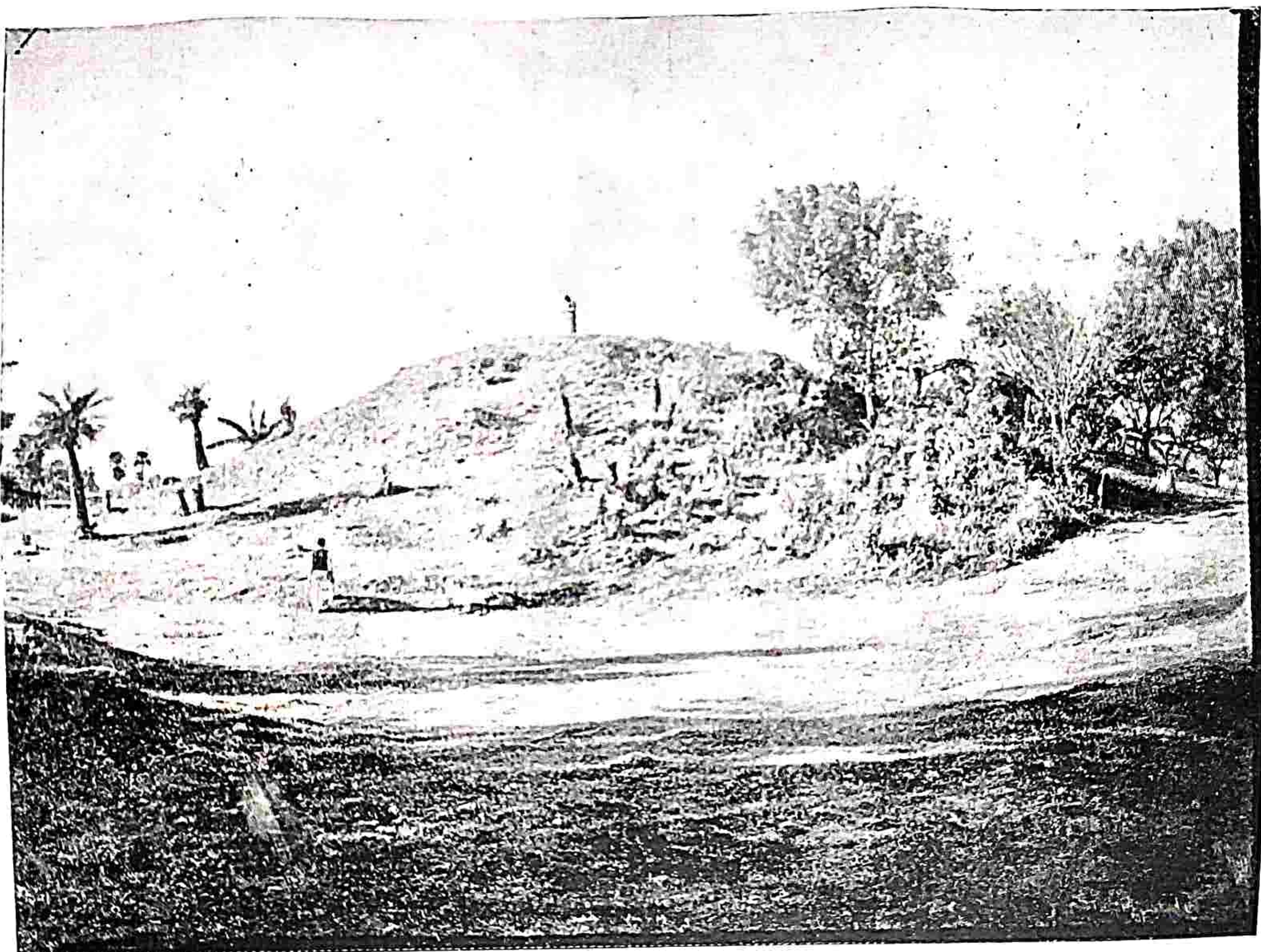
General view of the Buddha-relic stūpa

suggests that even the mud *stūpas* gradually became bigger and bigger in size until the brick *stūpas* came into existence.

Let us examine how the Buddhist relic *stūpa* tells a history of the *stūpa* architecture of the region of Vaiśālī. The original *stūpa* was a small structure being only 26′6″ in diameter; it was entirely built of earth (Pl. I). One layer of earth, usually about 2″ to 2.5″ in thickness, was separated from the other by a very thin layer of white *kankars*. In the extant portion of the *stūpa* as many as twenty-seven such layers, being 4′8″ in height, were detected[7]. The indication given by the slope of the *stūpa* in the south-western quadrant indicated that the height of the *stūpa*, when complete, should have been about 11′4″, excluding the *harmikā* at the top, if it existed. Its height, as preserved, was only about half of the original one, mainly due to dilapidation and the pit dug at its top. The layers of alternating earth and *kankar* could be seen in the section of the trench dug near its centre. On the western side the extant part of the drum of the *stūpa* could be visualised satisfactorily. No foundation seemed to have been dug in case of this original *stūpa*, probably because it was a mud structure. Only a plinth, 1′ in height, was raised above the ground, made of dark earth with a lot of *kankars* and pot-sherds including those of the N. B. P. Ware in it. Outside the *stūpa* and over the plinth was a concrete floor, 4″ in thickness, extending all round the *stūpa*.

The most important feature of the Buddha-relic *stūpa* of Vaiśālī was that it, along with its three enlargements, had four platforms at all the four cardinal points, which may be described as *āyakapaṭas* or *āryakapaṭas*, i.e., the holy platforms, most probably intended for placing the offerings at the time of worshipping the *stūpa*. Such platforms formed a prominent feature of the *stūpas* at Amarāvatī, Nagārjunakoṇḍa etc. in Āndhradeśa, and the inscriptions at the latter place expressly describe as āyakapaṭas, the holy or sacred platforms. Hitherto these *āyakapaṭas* were not, however, known to be forming part of any *stūpa* in northern or western India. The *āyakapaṭas* in Āndhradeśa are also at the four cardinal points of the *stūpa* as at Vaiśālī, but there are some points of difference between the two. The former are decorated with fine beautifully carved stone pillars of commanding height placed upon them, and there used to be a terrace behind them going all round the *stūpa*. Both these features are absent in connection with the *āyakapaṭas* of the *stūpa* at Vaiśālī at any stage. As the original *stūpa* at Vaiśālī

7 The plate No. 1 shows twenty one of these layers.



Pla. II

General view of the northern mound of Bhīmasena kā pallā :
Pre-Christian era mud stūpa

was built in the pre-Mauryan period, the *āyakapaṭas* of this *stūpa* were obviously much earlier than those of the *stūpas* in Āndhradeśa, none of which goes to a period earlier than the 2nd century B. C. The pre-Buddhist *chaityas* at Vaiśālī were usually open shrines with a tree or rock in the centre, in front of which there was a raised platform for placing the religious offerings. The *āyakapaṭas* of the original *stūpa* seem to have derived from these platforms of the earlier *chaityas*. In case of the *āyakapaṭas* of Āndhradeśa it may now be concluded that the people of Āndhradeśa, possibly, borrowed the idea of building *āyakapaṭas* with the *stūpas* from the land associated with the life of the Buddha, where the Buddhist stupas were first built.

The original *stūpa*, when dilapidated, was not only renovated but was enlarged also sometime in the 1st half of 3rd century B. C. The surrounding wall of this enlargement (hereafter first enlargement) was preserved only in three to eleven courses, but was preserved over a considerable length. It could be traced over an arc of 22′ between the eastern and northern *āyakapaṭas*, over an arc of 22′9″ between the northern and western *āyakapaṭas*, over an arc of 19′8″ between the western and southern *āyakapaṭas*. The outer wall of none of the enlargement was preserved to such an extent. The diameter of this enlargement was measured 34′4″. The enlarged *stūpa* seemed to have bulged out to the south-east in comparison with the original *stūpa*. It was built in kiln-burnt bricks, their dimensions being 14.5″ to 15″ × 9″ to 11″ × 2″ to 2.5″. The structure was assigned to a period between 300 and 250 B.C., because the Northern Black Polished Ware and cast coins were found from the walking level of the structure[8]. All the four *āyakapaṭas* of this enlargement were found, but in different degrees of preservations: the southern *āyakapaṭa* being 6′9″ x 3′6″, was preserved in fifteen courses of bricks. The eastern, western and northern ones were partly enclosed in the later *āyakapaṭas;* naturally their dimensions could not be ascertained.

After the dilapidation of the first enlargement, the *stūpa* was renovated as a result of which the structure became slightly smaller in size than the first enlargement. Its diameter was reduced by 4′8″. The new *stūpa* was slightly bulging out to the west with reference to the centre of the original *stūpa*; it was preserved only in the south-western and north-western sectors. The most interesting feature of this renova-

8 Author's unpublished report on *Vaiśālī Excavations, 1958-62.*

tion was that the old brickbats and sun-dried bricks were used in an indiscriminate manner. The dimensions of the latter were 15″×9″ to 10′6″×2′ 6″. This stage of the *stūpa* had also four *āyakapaṭas*, the remnants of which were traced on all the four cardinal points. The completely preserved *āyakapaṭa* was measured 11′6″×6′10″ being traced in four courses of bricks.

It is interesting to note that the *āyakapaṭas* of this renovated *stūpa*, though built at one and the same time, were different in construction. The *āyakapaṭa* of the north as well as that on the west were formed merely by raising the height of the earlier *āyakapaṭas* of the first enlargement. But the *āyakapaṭas* to the south and the east were enlarged by enclosing those of the earlier structures. Only the southern *āyakapaṭa* was complete in dimension, being 10′9″×7′5″, other *āyakapaṭas* were incomplete. Associated finds attributed this second stage of renovation to the first quarter of the third century B.C.

The *stūpa* was renovated for the third time and the size of the structure was enlarged. This enlargement was a substantial structure, the breadth of the new surrounding wall varying from 18″ to 40″. Generally speaking brick-bats were used for inside and full bricks were used for the facing. The size of the bricks showed a remarkable variation; some were 13.6″×9″×2′6″, some 14″×10.6″×3′6″ and some 9.9″×8.6″×2′2″. It is not possible to explain this remarkable variation in the dimensions of the bricks except on the assumption that earlier bricks were used for the new structure.

The extant portion of the circumference of this enlargement, which was preserved in the south-western and north-western quadrants only, covered an arc of 60′6″, As a result of the enlargement the diameter of the *stūpa* increased to 38′2″ ; the new structure was bulging out to south-south-west with reference to the centre of the original *stūpa*. Here and all the four *āyakapaṭas* were traced. This stage of the *stūpa* was assigned to c. 2nd century B. C.[9]

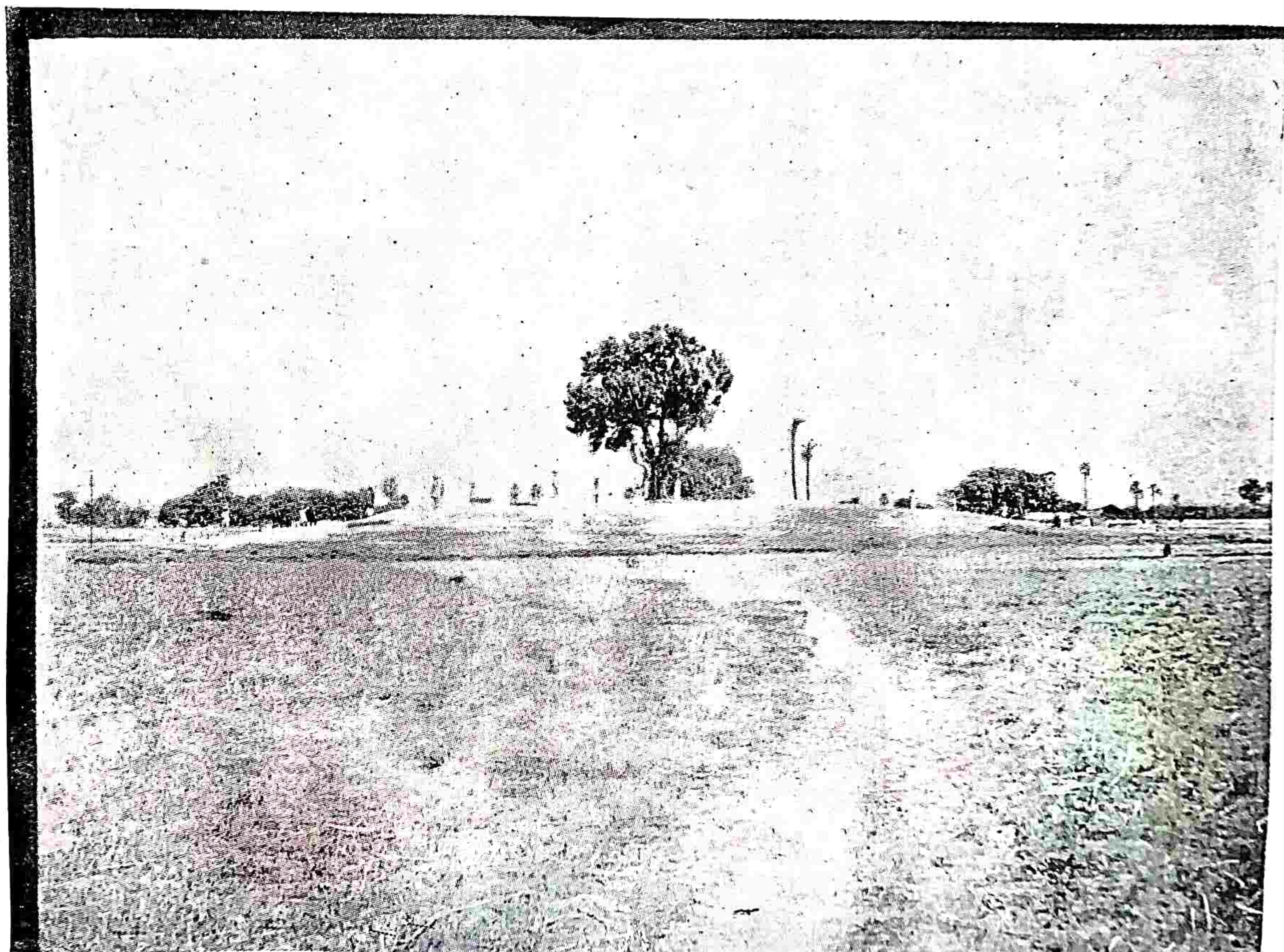
This third enlargement seemed to have lasted for long, sometime in 1st century A.D. an effort was made to strengthen and save the *stūpa* by supplying it with a buttressing in the south-western sector of the structure as the exposed structure suggested. This was the final buttressing. At last the *stūpa*, under review, gave way owing to the effects of

9 *Ibid.*



Pla. III

General view of the southern mound of Bhīmasena kā pallā :
Pre-Christian era mud-stūpa



Pla. IV
General view of the Marpasauna mound :
Pre-Christian mud stūpa

inundation of the area, when the buttressing proved to be ineffective in course of time. Later on the structure was robbed off by brick robbers also.

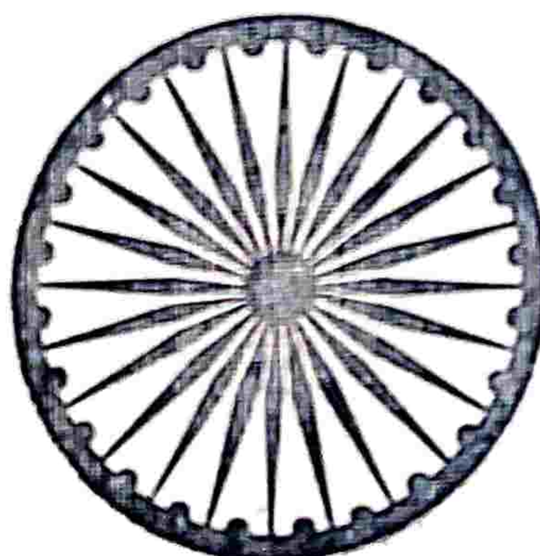
Besides the above observation, no further information about the *stūpa* architecture of the vicinity of Vaiśālī could be available. The future explorations and excavations on the site in this direction may add something more to our knowledge of the *stūpa* architecture of the region.

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